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CHAPTER XII

SPINNING, DYEING, AND WEAVING. MAT-MAKING AND BASKETRY

I. SPINNING

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In the chapter on agriculture (Chapter VIII) I have already referred to the fact that the cotton plants are tended by the women, who also pick the bolls, pack them in their deep baskets, and carry them home on their backs. The seeds are removed by a machine like a small mangle or clothes-wringer, with two closely fitting rollers of hard wood. The fibers pass through between the rollers, leaving the seeds behind divested of every filament. This Karen cotton-gin is like that of the Burmese, the people of Borneo, and the Filipinos.[1] (See upper illustration, p. 109.)

After ginning the next process is whipping the fibers into a workable mass, much like cotton batting. This is done with a bow whose handle is straight and heavy, while the thin tip is bent in a sharp curve when the bow-string is drawn tight. The women and girls engaged in whipping the cotton, which corresponds to carding in a cotton-mill, move the bow with the left hand in small circles just above the cotton and keep snapping the string with the right thumb, which is protected by a cloth wrapping, until a layer of fibers encircles the string in a more or less parallel and compact order. When the space between the string and the belly of the bow has become filled, the aggregation of fibers is removed and flattened out on a mat. The twanging of a room full of oscillating bows sounds like a battery of unmuffled motors, at the same time filling the air with flying bits of cotton as though one were in a snow-storm. (See lower illustration, p. 109.)

The layers of cotton-fibers are next divided into narrow strips, and rolled on the mat or the thigh into small rolls of about a cubit's length and of the thickness of one's thumb. From these rolls the yarn is spun by means of the spinning-wheel, which is like those

[1] See Hose and MacDougall's *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, Vol. I, 221, for description of the processes of cotton-ginning in the region of which they treat. The methods they describe are remarkably like those used by the Karen.

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GINNING COTTON IN THE PEGU HILLS

BEATING COTTON INTO SMOOTH LAYERS WITH A BOW
This Burmese woman, who lives in the village of Kyaye Ek, was more ready to pose for this photo than her Karen sisters.

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283 found all over Burma. This contrivance is of the simplest form, consisting of a driving-wheel about two feet in diameter with spokes and rim of bamboo, the axle of which is fitted in an ornamental flat post rising from one corner of a thick bottom board, which is three and a half feet long and a foot or more wide. Near the middle of the other end of this board a shorter post rises, to the base of which is affixed a little wheel, with a grooved rim, in line with the driving-wheel, the two wheels being connected by a slender belt. There is a handle on the large wheel and a horizontal iron spindle fastened in the center of the little one. The spinner sits on the floor, with her machine drawn up to her knees in front of her, the driving-wheel at her left hand and the point of the spindle at her right. She attaches some fibers of a roll to a spun thread tied to the spindle, and sets this to rotating rapidly by turning the large wheel with her left hand, meantime continuing to pay out the fibers from the roll with her right hand. After the spindle has twisted the loose filaments into a tight yarn, the spinner feeds the newly spun yarn on to the spindle and repeats the process with another roll of fibers, until the spindle is full.

II. Dyeing and Weaving

386 The next stage in the work is that of dyeing. The colors imparted to the skeins of cotton yarn are shades of blue to black, red, and yellow. In producing the blue shades the skeins are soaked in a solution of the bark or leaves of the wild indigo plant, called "naw xaw" in Karen, the depth of the color depending on the duration and repetition of the soaking, until a blue black has been obtained. The red dyes are derived from the stick-lac so commonly found in the Toungoo Hills. During the years just preceding the World War a good deal of foreign dyestuff was introduced among the Karen people, and yellow came to be used in addition to the other colors.[2]

286 The weaving of the yarn into cloth comes next in order. The threads that are to form the warp of the cloth must first be got ready for the hand-loom ("hta"). This is done by unwinding the skeins and stringing the thread around a few pegs driven into a leveled and cleaned space of ground, until enough has been laid down to fill the loom. If there is no convenient place out-of-doors for this purpose, the long threads are strung on pegs around the

[2] For an account of dyes and methods of dyeing in Burma, see The *Upper Burma Gazetteer*, Vol. II, Pt. I, 307-309.